

Waste Not, Want Not

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 23 July, 2003 - 07:25

Eponymous Anonymous

My granny always said, “Waste not, want not, Epanon” (that was her nickname for me; cute, huh?) Well, I took her advice to heart, generally, and though at the time I rebelled against many of her non-wasting measures (like, washing out and reusing all plastic bags until they got holes – why, I resorted to poking holes in them deliberately, when she wasn't looking! just to get out of washing them!),

once I was keeping house for myself, I found that granny was right about lots of things, including that “waste not, want not” idea.

Now, once I had my kids and was trying to make ends meet, I really tried to get into the spirit of what granny was talking about, with the waste thing. I'd make those little buggers eat up everything on their plate, I decided, and to wear those hand-me-downs whether they'd like it or not (well, until they just couldn't be mended anymore). It's fine for a boy to learn to ride his sister's old pink bike with the purple butterflies on it: those neighborhood kids who would make fun of him just don't know the value of “waste not, want not”, apparently. Just showing their lack of learning, I thought.

I took the kids over to the library to pick through the used books that they sell real cheap there, you know? And as I was rifling through the stacks of periodicals one day, I ran across a black-and-white paper journal called *Taking Children Seriously* and bought it for a nickel real quick because the baby was wanting to go. It got buried in the piles of stuff on the kitchen table for awhile, but when I ran across it a few months later, I sat down and read that thing from cover to cover. I could not believe that people really thought that way, but on the other hand, some of it made real sense to me. I couldn't stop thinking about it, so we got a computer and I read more about it on the lists and the website. And wonder of wonders, one day that “waste not, want not” adage came up ... like there was something wrong with it!

It was on the [TCS List](#), and one gal was complaining about a child wasting time watching TV, I think it was. Well, you can guess what kind of a fuss that kicked up amongst the folks on that list! There was lots of defending of TV as a good source of information, and advice on rooting out entrenched theories about how people spend their time, all of which I've since found very helpful to my thinking process by the way, but this one fellow really brought me up short when he made the observation that the only time really wasted is time spent doing something that you really don't want to do, something that makes no sense to you and you're stuck doing it only because someone else is making you; or conversely, when you're being prevented from doing something that you really want to do. And you are bored, because of this. Now, that is wasted time.

Somehow, that really made me sit up and take notice about this waste issue, and the good and the bad of it. It took me quite some time after this to gradually come to notice and observe the occasions when I was worrying about waste and taking that out on the kids, to no good end. And it wasn't just them, either. We do it to ourselves! My ever-lovin' partner grew up in a huge family, one where if you didn't get to the table on time at dinner, you would miss out on having any food at all. So my partner is inclined to eat up any of the food the kids leave, and any food experiments that don't turn

out so well – all in the interests of quelling waste (to the detriment of his girlish figure, if you catch my drift). I myself have realized that I need to only eat things that I really want and like, and I've come to give myself permission to do this only after years of being under the influence of **TCS** notions, as I am learning to extend that courtesy to everyone everywhere in the interests of autonomy. Ooh, I like that word, autonomy. Kind of rolls off the tongue. And the respect thereof surely does improve lives in this family.

But I'm meandering off-course here. In figuring out my “waste not, want not” issues, I just had to apologize to the oldest child in our family, for comments I used to make about how he uses his room – which is mostly for storage, it seems, in a whirlwind fashion; he thinks the floor is just a big shelf, seldom spends time in there and even sleeps in a sibling's room. With some hard thinking, I found that I had been coveting that space. I could use some more space for a music room or an office or a sewing room or a retreat or a padded cell! Ok, just kidding about that last one...sort of... but once I changed how I thought of waste and respected his choices in how he used his room, it somehow freed me up to consider the vast range of choices I have in using the rest of the space that we have! It was right there in front of me all along, but being stuck in that “waste not, want not” rut hid lots of options from my blinkered mind.

We still run up on plenty of hard places, where we find ourselves kvetching about how money is being spent or how time is being used. When that happens, one of us eventually has the light bulb turn on in their head and remembers, “Oh, yeah! It's time to go over priorities again and figure out what we really believe about what is happening and what could be better ways to get what we really want out of this!” Those old ruts run pretty deep, and we fall into them when we are not paying attention. The bright side is, we have a better idea about how to climb out again. Like granny always said, “Epanon, there are two types of people in this world: those who watch things happen and those who make things happen. Which one are you?”

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Comments

Where's the waste?

Submitted by Terra on 24 July, 2003 - 21:59

Hey, Epanon, great story. My folks used to hate "waste" too... still do... they made me do a whole term of German night classes even though every second of them was torture... because they'd paid for them and it would be a waste if I didn't do them. Gee didn't that make me feel good, not. It made me feel like crap. I salute you people who step away from that "waste not, want not" crap.

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What would you do if your kid...

Submitted by Pokemamma on 25 July, 2003 - 10:21

What would you do if your kid willfully wasted a whole lot of Pepsi in an angry fit? Are you saying there's no such thing as waste? What about the others in the family who want to drink the Pepsi he's tipped out?

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what's the anger about?

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 25 July, 2003 - 12:58

That would be my focus. The 'pouring of the Pepsi' is a tool (not a waste) to express the anger. If other family members are angry about the spilled Pepsi, rather than concerned about the original kid's anger, why is that?

There is always more Pepsi to be had. That's an easy problem to solve. The problem provoking the anger is an important one. Why does the kid need a prop- Pepsi- to draw more attention to his problem? Why be concerned about a non-issue (wasting Pepsi!) rather than the child's problem?

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what if there isn't

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 24 August, 2003 - 04:23

What if it is food and the family goes hungry because of it? (We are a family of 5 on no income - and have been unemployed for over a year)

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solve each problem

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 1 October, 2003 - 19:04

The child who wants to pour things doesn't want to go hungry, does s/he? Help the child to find better things to pour than food.

though I'm imagining a family lined up, lying on their backs on the floor as the youngest member of the family goes from person to person, pouring food into each mouth ;)

The problems of income and unemployment are separate problems that can be solved, but they don't have to block the creativity around solving a myriad other problems in ways that everyone can be happy with!

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"Waste not want not" is often about manipulating kids' behaviour

Submitted by Edith (not verified) on 3 April, 2005 - 12:38

I think that the usual reason why kids are told "waste not want not" is more to do with "being grateful" and "knowing your place" etc than actually solving a real problem. So kids are being told "waste not want not" for manipulative reasons, to shape their behaviour in a dishonest way, and this is when I start to have a problem.

Now I personally agree with not wasting stuff. I think we live in society where we are told constantly that it is ok to chuck stuff away, upgrade to newer and better things etc, and I personally feel this to be a way of making

money for the manufacturers, nothing more. The environmental effects of this terrify me for my kids. I mean, we go shopping and carry our purchases home in bags made from oil! Then we throw the bags away! We are desperately short on oil, a commodity on which our whole society relies, yet we have landfill sites full of oil! So personally, I agree with trying to conserve the world's resources.

In our house, it is known that this is my perspective and that I will want to restrict spending in line with my environmental beliefs. But I think it is wrong to manipulate or guilt trip someone else into not wasting stuff. Give the reasons up front!

I also think it might be fair for a family on a limited budget to say to a child, "We cannot really afford to give you German lessons, but if you are sure that this is something you want to do then we will make other sacrifices. But you must agree to go to all the lessons, even if it turns out you hate it."

(I doubt very much that this was the situation that occurred in the previous posters' house, btw! Most families don't give kids such a choice).

If the child then makes the choice to do German lessons under these conditions, then yes, the family is entitled to expect them to finish them. Not to beat them, or refuse them food if they don't, nor even to drive them there and make them sit at their desk, but entitled to be annoyed if the child fails to attend the lessons after they agreed to provide them. The child has backed out on a deal and needs to see that the consequence of this is that the person they entered into a deal with is annoyed, or whatever. And maybe that the whole family goes without a holiday or whatever.

And the family should not fake annoyance to manipulate the child into attending. If I spend 2 pounds on advance booking an event for my child and he doesn't want to go - well I'm not too bothered. If my partner decides at the last minute not to go to a show I've spent 50 pounds on, and which he gave no indication of not wanting to go to before - well then I'm annoyed.

And the other issue re wasting time - well, ultimately, it is their time to waste as they want. Actually, I do see TV watching as a waste of MY time, I don't enjoy it much and really just watch to be sociable. It's not how I learn. I'd love to get rid of the TV and put a nice plant or something there. When everyone else is out, I like to just turn everything off and have peace. But to get rid of the TV would make my partner and son deeply unhappy, and me only quite temporarily happy. I'd also be unhappy from having made them unhappy so the benefit overall to the family would be negative. In the final analysis, it's not up to me to decide how they spend their time, unless it actually affects me.

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Symptoms and Causes

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 25 January, 2006 - 01:28

It seems to me that the real problem here, too, is concern with symptoms rather than causes. People are annoyed about a single instance of wasted Pepsi, money, time, or other resource that is, realistically, quite abundant if you **really** want to have it.

What sense is there in making a deal that the child will attend all the German lessons even if they turn out to really hate it? What benefit results from the child's suffering, as opposed to just admitting that the money has been wasted this one time and there's nothing one can do to improve the situation; that the reasonable thing is to forget

about it and be wiser in the future if possible. Forcing the child to the lessons hurts the child, the parent, and potentially the other people at the lessons who would genuinely enjoy attending.

The only reason the parent can want the child to attend all the lessons is to get petty revenge over the lost money. There must be an underlying psychological reason for this -- perhaps the parent sees the child's refusing the lessons as symbolic for disrespect toward the parent and their work. The child doesn't see how hard the parent works for the money, while the parent doesn't see how much the child suffers at the lessons. This, too, may distort the perceptions of each. In my experience people almost always act humanely and respectfully when they find out personally about the other's actual emotions, but may be cold and selfish otherwise.

In any case, think about the proportions. Which is worse: one evening of the parent feeling upset about the wasted money, or one month or more of the child enduring the tedious lessons? A sound outcome requires no martyrdom from either the child or the parent. Surely the solution here is for the child to quit the lessons, and for the parent and child to find out about each other's emotions rather than engage in psychological warfare.

It was mentioned that the deal for the lessons is ``fair". I think many now middle-aged people have this abstract notion of fairness and respect that has everything to do with appearances and nothing to do with reasonable, efficient behavior that results from taking into account the people involved. It is always an ugly sight when people try to rationalize their destructive behavior with abstract logical principles. It is especially sad when they can persuade others to believe they are right.

If the lessons are a ``fair" deal in some abstract sense, what does that matter at all? What matters in life is that the people involved feel content at each moment. When a person has a healthy set of conscious values, the problems of waste and disrespect will disappear as a side effect.

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